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SOME THOUGHTS ON LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE PROCESSES.

BY- CASSIDY, FREDERIC G.

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENG.,CHAMPAIGN,ILL

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THE DEFINITION OF THE WORD "LANGUAGE" CAN BE LIMITED TO MEAN "A VOCAL AND AUDITORY MEANS OF COMMUNICATION, WHICH WORKS BY THE SYMBOLIC PROCESS, WHICH HAS A COMPLEX STRUCTURE, AND WHICH IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING SO LONG AS IT REMAINS IN USE." THERE ARE SIX IMPLICATIONS OF THIS DEFINITION--(1) ALTHOUGH LANGUAGE IS PRIMARILY AUDITORY AND VOCAL, IT CAN BE EXTENDED BY THE ACTIVITY OF WRITING. (2) WHENEVER COMMUNICATION IS INTENDED, THE MEDIA IS A SYSTEM OF LANGUAGE. (3) WE CAN USE SOUND SYMBOLICALLY TO SPEAK OF AN INFINITE NUMBER OF CONCRETE, ABSTRACT, MYTHOLOGICAL, AND FANTASIED CONCEPTS WHICH CAN BE CHANGED AND ADAPTED TO NEW USES. (4) THROUGH A SCIENTIFIC TREATMENT OF LANGUAGE, SOME OF THE PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT, ITS STRUCTURE, AND USE HAVE BEEN DISCOVERED AND DEMONSTRATE THAT NO SET OF FEATURES CAN BE EXPECTED TO BE UNIVERSALLY PRESENT IN ALL LANGUAGES. (5) LANGUAGES ARE RESPONSIVE TO THE CULTURE THEY SERVE. (6) SINCE LANGUAGE CHANGES, THE ENGLISH TEACHER HAS A RESPONSIBILITY TO MAKE A CONTINUOUS EFFORT TO EVALUATE AND, POSSIBLY, TO UTILIZE NEW LANGUAGE THEORIES. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "LANGUAGE, LINGUISTICS, AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS, PROCEEDINGS OF THE SPRING INSTITUTES, 1963." CHAMPAIGN, ILL., NCTE, 1963.) (MM)

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SOME THOUGHTS ON LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE PROCESSES

FREDERIC G. CASSIDY
University of Wisconsin

In the following remarks I should like to use the word "language" in a limited and literal way, excluding such means of communication as gesture, mimicry, or picture-making. I use it in the strict sense of a vocal and auditory means of communication, which works by the symbolic process, which has a complex structure, and which is constantly changing so long as it remains in use. I shall treat this definition under six headings.

The Vocal/Auditory System

First: Language is vocal and auditory—this is historically true and remains true at all times, yet many people are confused about it. In the writings even of some linguists I have seen the statement that "Speech is the *real* language." Though there is truth here, I submit that this way of putting it is misleading. It does not tell us what the relationships between speech and writing are, and it seems to imply that there is something unreal or not quite genuine about writing.

The sense in which we consider speech as primary and writing as secondary is that speech came first historically, remains first in our learning processes, and is more frequently used by all people (except the congenitally deaf and speechless). But, most importantly, the system of writing is based upon and must always be reconvertible to the system of speech. Human beings, as they became human, discovered articulate speech. This linguistic ability, whenever and however it started, set man so decidedly apart from the rest of the animals that it is used by anthropologists as a classifying characteristic. We call mankind *homo sapiens*—a patent bit of self-flattery, which some of the other animals might well resent; we could with greater justice call him *homo loquens*.

Man invented articulate speech early in his career and elaborated it as he himself developed. The speech centers in the human brain were evolving too—it is a problem of the chicken and the egg, whether these centers made possible the elaboration of speech or whether the elaboration of speech led to the greater development of the centers. Certainly they must have come along together.

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Much later, in comparatively recent times, man made another invention: he learned how to correlate pictures with speech, so that evanescent words might be given a more permanent form. At first the pictures gave him only the substance of a communication; later he learned how to make them reflect the sounds of the voice itself so that the written message could be read back into the original spoken one. He used writing, at first, for practical purposes such as keeping accounts; only later did he apply it to other uses. We must not forget that in ancient times the important activities of religion and heroic song were kept up and passed on *orally*, by careful tradition and rigorous discipline; in fact, when we find such matters being written down it is almost a sure indication that the oral disciplines are beginning to decay.

Because the ability to read and write has hitherto been the possession of a very small and usually restricted part of humanity—because schooling has been the perquisite of a very few—it has naturally acquired prestige. We forget the fact that speech has to be learned because most of us have already learned it before we become conscious of such things as prestige. Learning to read and write involves a change-over from dependence on listening to dependence on seeing and translating. The whole educational process therefore leads us into being eye-minded about language rather than ear-minded. A silly yet common enough misunderstanding results when a teacher tells a student that there is no such word as *ain't* or *thing-a-ma-jig* because they are, when used at all, oral rather than written. The fact that a feature of language can be or has been written is not necessary to its existence or its reality. If it is spoken and takes part in articulate communication, it is language. The question of prestige, or the grounds for acceptance or rejection, therefore, is quite another matter with social or aesthetic implications.

Another reason why some linguists consider speech as more "real" than writing is that the vocal element actually enters into grammatical structure, though our writing system fails to make this clear. We use not only the sound-units out of which words and sentences are constructed, but also, when we speak, the accentuation, pitch of the voice, and certain ways of joining and dividing the parts, all of which are audible, and to all of which we respond, but which are less well represented in writing. A practiced reader reading aloud can, of course, supply these from his knowledge of the spoken forms. Underlining and punctuation can help him somewhat. But unless the writing is careful it may easily fall into ambiguities that would never occur in speech. The teacher of writing has to recognize this short-

coming in the writing system and see that it is compensated for by rewriting in an unambiguous way, an exercise which makes the language process a more conscious one. And this may to some extent counterbalance its shortcoming.

One other thing should not be forgotten in comparing spoken and written forms. Because the latter are produced more slowly and in less quantity and are intended to be less ephemeral than common speech, they have the possibility of being *more careful*, and they are usually subjected to some criteria of a qualitative kind. On the whole, what gets into speech is more casual, more trivial, more ordinary than what gets into print. On the whole, more substance, more control, more attention to the arts of expression are found in printed language. This is not a matter of possibility, but simply a by-product of the way the field is divided between speech and writing. The best speech is as highly artistic as the best writing, and writing can be quite as vapid and piddling and small as small-talk. On the other hand, statements that contain something worth preserving usually find their way into the medium which preserves them better.

My first point, then, is that the auditory aspects of language must never be forgotten. Language is primarily an activity of the voice and the ear; secondarily, it can be carried on by means of writing. Yet written language, though it depends on speech, is in no sense unreal; and though we use it less than speech, in literate societies we nevertheless choose it as our medium when we want to communicate something of more than passing value. This tends to make us think of literature as something in books. It is not. Literature is in *language*, which we record in books when it is good enough.

The Message

To say, as my second point, that language is a means of communication is not quite to state the obvious. Human noises, like other animal noises, can be made not for communication but simply for expression. Aesthetic theories are built upon this *fact*. We sigh and groan, sob and shout, so as to release inward sensations like birds singing or wolves baying at the moon. Such noises may chance *incidentally* to communicate but they are not produced for this purpose. Real communication involves the intention of getting some meaning across between, or among, people. Communication in language requires that both or all know the code or system of the same language; the people who can all speak a certain language constitute a speech community.

The expressive noises of humanity are to some extent inarticulate

(the grunts and sobs), but we tend also to use articulate language in an expressive way, to exclaim in words when we are alone, as if someone were there to be spoken to. Or else we talk to ourselves, taking both sides in the communication, like Alice in Wonderland scolding herself as she falls down the rabbit-hole. This fact has been utilized in many modern plays and stories, in which characters are placed together as if they were in conversation, as if they were communicating. But all they really do is to externalize in words their internal monolog. On the stage this results in baffling *non sequitur*–the two speakers take turns speaking, though perhaps not even on the same subject. The irony of man's solipsism is effectively suggested. And yet, we would never have been able to talk to ourselves if we had not learned to talk to others. Language as it is would not have come into being except as a social product: our noises would have remained merely expressive. They would not have needed to undergo the conventionalization which makes them into a system. We would never have discovered the symbolic process by which language works. And that brings me to point three.

Abstractions, Symbols, and Concepts

Animal noises are not meaningless. They often have contextual connections. The most obvious illustration of this, I suppose, is the mating-call, distinctive in many species. In the days when hens were allowed to raise chicks–nowadays all they see is the egg, which is hustled off to the incubator–a hen would cluck in different ways in different contexts. There was a food-finding call, a danger call, and of course the special call of urgency when she wanted to sit and hatch some eggs without being disturbed. But there is no evidence that animal noises ever become symbolic: they are not equated with things or made to stand for things, as our noises are: let noise X stand for this and noise Y stand for that. Animal signals therefore remain quite broad and general, whereas human ones can be highly specific.

With this tool in which the sound or group of sounds stands for the thing–a concrete thing or an abstraction–we are able to communciate about things that are not present. Suppose that a dog, in a moment of generosity, wants to share a hidden bone with another dog. He can no doubt visualize it for himself, and he can remember where he hid it and how to get there, but he cannot tell the other dog: the best he can do is to lead him there. On the other hand *we* could say, "Come and share my ham bone which I have hidden under the old willow tree by the fish pond." We can train a dog to make simple responses to our speech, so that when we say "Ball!" he will

rush off to see whether the red ball is in its usual place and bring it to us. But he is pretty much limited in the number of commands he can respond to, and in any case he cannot make them to us or to other dogs.

Our ability to use sound symbolically not only allows us to speak about things not present to the senses, but even to speak about non-existent things, such as centaurs and unicorns—to hypostatize. The argument (false logic, of course) goes something like this: "All names refer to things; 'centaur' is a name; therefore, 'centaur' refers to a thing." We then proceed to define it as half man and half horse and to draw pictures of it. But of course this does not confer on it the kind of existence that men and horses have. Its existence is only conceptual, and all that we have proved is that we can name concepts, or that concepts are included among "things" but not that concepts have a necessary correspondence to physical things in the external world of sense. The student of general semantics today makes his distinctions among levels of abstraction so as to prevent us from becoming the victims of hypostasy.

All human beings, no matter how primitive or undeveloped their form of society may be, have real language which uses the symbolic process, and they are capable of making abstractions and forming concepts. Some anthropologists in the 1920's used to say that because a language did not have a word for *tree* but only words for specific trees such as *banana* and *coconut*, the speakers were incapable of abstraction. But this notion has since been pretty well exploded. If the speaker of such a language wants to abstract and express the notion "tree" he can use the word for a common type of tree in its quality as typical. If we had no word for tree and found a new type or one whose name we did not know, we could still call it an "oak-type-thing," or a "maple-type-thing." In short, the language provides the means of dealing with new situations.

The number of symbolic noises that we can make is theoretically infinite: even a small number of sound units will have a great many possible permutations and combinations, and these themselves can be further combined. Our word-storing system (what is called the "memory" in electronic computers and human beings) has enormous capacity; there is no evidence that anyone's memory has ever been stuffed to the point where it could hold no more. Therefore our ability to produce linguistic symbols is also unlimited, and the thing which controls our vocabulary, its size, or the degree of complexity to which it develops is purely practical: we carry it only so far as we need to. If and when a new need arises, our vocabulary can be enlarged.

This fact can be observed through the way in which languages adapt themselves to the kind of society they serve, expanding or developing in one direction or another according to need. If the society is a hunting one, for example, and depends for its existence on walrus or reindeer, the vocabulary connected with the hunting of these animals will be complex and detailed. The grammatical structure, too, will be elaborated wherever necessary to express the modes of experience vital to these speakers.

In connection with this the question has been raised—very strikingly by Benjamin Whorf—whether, once a language is formed, its speakers are not in a sense trapped in it. Every language, he says, reflects the kind of analysis of experience, or understanding of phenomena, that its speakers have made. If we analyze the world in terms of a linear time-scheme, we will invent a structure to express past, present, and future, and those who learn the language thereafter will be committed to thinking in these same terms because they are the only terms which the language provides; yet *this* is not the sole manner in which experience can be analyzed; another culture may think not in terms of past, present, future, but of whether an action has been completed or is in progress, or whether it is customary rather than of unique occurrence. Will those speakers also be forced to continue thinking in those terms because they are the only ones built into their language?

This question has in a sense been answered already. There is nothing in the structure of the language which forces us; it can always be changed and adapted to new uses. The fact that we still talk about *sunset* does not prevent us from knowing that the sun only appears to go down—that, actually, *we* are the ones moving, being carried to a position from which we can no longer see the sun. Once we discover this fact we can perfectly well express it. The existence of the word *sunset* may predispose us not to question the observation it offers, but it need not entrap us. May I remind you of Archibald MacLeish's poem *You, Andrew Marvell,* in which a human being, a speck on the surface of the earth, is spun around with it away from the sun; while the shadow of night sweeps ineluctably westward over land after land. MacLeish has changed the point of observation. He is conscious of the earth with himself on it, turning ever deeper into the dark.

If we know that it is not true, why have we not thrown away the word *sunset* and substituted something more accurate for it? Since we are turning away from the sun and into the dark, why not call it something like *dark-turn*? "I'll meet you before dark-turn." Well, we

could—yet in simple appearance the sun does seem to go down. The habitual phrase is justified again every day; it has not seemed necessary to change our expression for it. To a colony on the moon, sunset will appear quite different; there will be nothing in the nature of the language to prevent the colonists from making a new word to describe it. The language contains and preserves many words for mistaken concepts of the past. The existence of a word guarantees nothing about the reality of what it refers to, except that mankind has conceived it and made a linguistic symbol for it.

In *Gulliver's Travels* Swift has given us the picture of a set of philosophers who try to find a substitute for language. They fear that when we speak we are expending vital breath and therefore shortening life. To avoid this dangerous expense of words they try to converse by carrying about on their backs huge sacks containing the things about which they may wish to communicate. When two of these philosophers meet on the street they unsling their packs and begin to pull out objects and show them to one another.

Have you ever carried this scene out in detail in your imagination? Just how much communication *could* ensue? The philosophers could show *things* to each other, but how or what could they communicate about them? They could perhaps appeal to the senses, expressing something like "This flower smells sweet" or "This egg is bad" by holding the object to the other man's nose. But how would they say "These shoes are too large" or "These shoes are black"? They could show shoes, but how indicate the property or quality? How express action and its properties or qualities? Possibly by gestures, to mean fast, slow, or the like? Clearly, the extent of the communications would be limited not as much by the size of the sack as by the clumsiness or vagueness of merely showing an object without being able to designate its properties or their relationships. Without the capacity to abstract, with no developed symbolic system, and with no structure by which statements could be made, Swift's worthy philosophers would be terribly limited and confined. Though they might not die from loss of breath, I fear they would from frustration.

The Descriptive Rationale

This brings me to the fourth point: Language is structured. Of course, in speaking of it before as having *system* we were saying virtually the same thing. Any structure has two essentials: it has parts, and they stand in a working relationship to each other. Clearly, the use of symbols to transfer information would require relative stability; the symbols would have to refer regularly to the same things, and the

interrelationships into which they were put would have to have regularly the same significance. To play a game in which the rules were always changing would hardly be satisfactory!

The scientific treatment of language began only about a century and a half ago. The past half century has gone into the effort to devise more rigorous and objective methods of describing languages, and chief among these has been the concentration upon structure rather than meaning. This came about in part through the study of languages all over the world, some of which proved to be radically different from any previously known. Furthermore, though linguistic science had begun by working with written remains from the past—the study we now call philology—these new languages usually had no written tradition. Linguistics had to deal with them directly as speech, to work out an entirely new approach, new methods of analysis, and a new technical terminology. The knowledge gained here was then turned back upon the old, familiar languages which the philologists had studied, and the new, more rigorous methods were applied to them with sometimes startling results.

Phonetics had helped the philologist to set up with some firmness the genetic relationships among languages; it was a major tool in comparative studies and in etymology. The written records of the past greatly simplified the actualities of sound, as all writing systems must. As the phonetician worked with living languages, however, and the more exactly and fully he recorded them, the more he came in danger of foundering in the mass of his own data—for there is no theoretical limit to the number of distinctions among sounds. He needed some principle by which he could separate the significant features from the nonsignificant.

The structural linguist has found such a principle in "opposition" or "contrast." Among the sounds of speech, he says, only those variations which function by contrast with others are significant. For example, the sounds in the middle of *dug* and *dig* are in contrast, a contrast upon which a difference in meaning rests. The contrasting sounds are therefore structurally significant. On the other hand, the sounds in (dag) and (dog) are audibly different, but since they are not in contrast and the word means the same whichever sound is used, the difference is nonsignificant. By discovering all the significant contrasts in any language one can get at its structural units. The *sound*-units, which are at the basic level, are called "phonemes."

Each language has a limited number of phonemes which are combined and recombined in regular ways to form the next higher level of functional units. Meaningful groups of phonemes that cannot be

reduced without changing their semantic or syntactic meaning are units of *form*, or "morphemes," sometimes equivalent to words, sometimes having to be combined to form words; but each, in any case, carrying an irreducible load of meaning. Like the phoneme, the morpheme may undergo variations in form which, if they do not affect its meaning, are structurally nonsignificant.

Just as an ideal phonology would list all the phonemes, describe the subphonemic variants, and all the possible combinations or sequences of phonemes that exist in the language being studied, so an ideal morphology would list every separate morpheme, all the variants, and the rules for combination. It is relatively easy to establish the phonemes of a language because there are seldom more than sixty or so. The morphemes of a highly elaborated language such as English, with a vocabulary of very mixed origin, are much harder to treat exhaustively. Our dictionaries list words but make no attempt to establish a complete list of morphemes. Yet these morphemes are the symbolic units that stand for other things referentially, or that show functional relationships within larger combinations.

Morphemes do not usually stand alone; usually they are used in groups, which we know as phrases, clauses, and sentences. And so we go up to the structural level of *syntax*, or the customary ways of behavior within the word group; and we try to describe these phenomena, the total description constituting a grammar of the language.

Now a basic principle among structural linguists is that each language must be described in its own terms because its grammar is not identical with the grammar of any other language; no set of features can be expected to be universally present. To try to use the system of language *A* in order to describe language *B* is certain to to be unsatisfactory. If the languages are genetically related, like Spanish and Italian, somewhat similar methods may be appropriate; but if the languages are English and Zulu, the same methods, if insisted upon, will merely produce bad descriptions. Professor Archibald Hill has included, as appendices to his *Introduction to Linguistic Structures*, sketches of the structures of Eskimo and Latin so that we may see how strikingly they differ from English. Yet as we all know, the pattern on which English grammar has traditionally been written is not its own, but that of Latin.

Properly seen, this is an accident of history and, so to speak, nobody's fault. There was certainly no intent by late Renaissance grammarians to bedevil future generations of American school children! Because, in the Renaissance, Latin came into a position of

enormous educational and cultural prestige, because the vernaculars of Europe were moving toward greater regularity and a certain standardization, because Latin furnished a convenient and (so they felt) admirable model, it was natural that it should be imitated. The phenomenon is a European one, not merely English. When French was respelled in the seventeenth century, the Latin model led to the preservation of letters which had long since ceased to be pronounced and are not pronounced today, though still spelled in. French spelling follows in part an etymological principle which seeks to exhibit this historical connection with Latin.

English authors of the sixteenth century, despite the protests of a native-minded group, went on a long raiding party in which they took over by the hundreds and even thousands Latin, Greek, Italian, French, and Spanish words. Dictionary makers in the seventeenth century did the same thing. So it is hardly surprising that the writers of grammar books should have followed along. The desire to Latinize English was tremendously powerful, and if not to Latinize it, at least to emphasize those respects in which it was like Latin and bemoan its differences. Further, Latin grammar furnished a ready-made terminology which could to some extent be used for English.

As we all know, this movement came to a head in the eighteenth century, at the latter end of which prescriptive grammar was established in the schools and so went on into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since it never truly described the facts of English grammar, since the language continued to change as usual despite the books, and since in these past two hundred years English-speaking people have gone through a social revolution, it is inevitable that these prescriptive grammars should have got seriously out of touch with present reality. In order to bring this fact home to us, to shake us out of a past, inapplicable tradition, the new grammarians have belabored the prescriptivists and their followers for some twenty-five years.

But perhaps the time has come when this attack may stop. The point has been made; the new grammar has proved its right to the succession. We should now be able to see the eighteenth century grammarians in historical perspective as neither vicious nor willful, but as the product of their era—as we are of ours. The hand of time was upon them. They were victims of the reigning worship of Latin, of an insistent public demand for a "correct" standard, of the current philosophical belief in the existence of intellectual and aesthetic universals, the belief that language reflected modes of thought and feeling seated in the fabric of the human mind. Starting with these premises, working on these principles, they did not do badly. Today,

with the scientific study of language, we know more and better than they did and realize that their principles were wrong. We realize that English grammar must be described in its own terms; that universal grammar is a mirage; that language cannot be fixed and prevented from changing. This being so, there is less fault in them than in us if we continue to follow them. We have the means of doing better.

Structural grammar has now worked out its principles and procedures fairly well, and the task has begun of writing the new description of English. Actually, however, that task is far from completion; no full or satisfactory structural grammar of English yet exists. Books by Fries, Trager and Smith, Hill, and others have dealt with some of the basic problems though none of them definitively. In the circumstances there is not yet any really satisfactory textbook though Francis, Sledd, Roberts, and others have started to show the way. The attack has been begun on problems of teaching: the new approach is being widely tested in the classroom. Nor is structuralism the only new approach: within the past half dozen years a quite different one, that of transformational or generative grammar, has burst upon the scene; its adherents are working hard to elaborate it and are promising great things. It seems to me that at the very least any responsible teacher must make the attempt to understand what is going on. I do not like the idea or the possibility of having a new dogma substituted uncritically for an old, nor do I like a "wave-of-the-future" philosophy in which one lies down before something which is considered inevitable and lets it roll over him. The teacher must be in the position of a sound and informed critic; the teacher must not accept—must, indeed, resist—a movement which cannot justify itself on its merits in the face of sound criticism. This, I believe, the new grammar can do. But we need to see the proof.

Language Variables

Let me come to the fifth point. If languages are responsive to the culture they serve, and if the culture develops into a complex one, the resulting language will be complex. Though languages may all have the same potentialities of development, the fact is that some have become much further elaborated than others and have much larger vocabularies with many specialized words capable of precise and highly technical distinctions. And not the vocabulary alone, but their form classes and syntactic structures are also likely to be more complex.

Since no two speakers speak exactly alike, every language will show some variations. But such individual differences are not very

significant, only when speech communities differ considerably does the complexity produce problems. The larger the area over which speakers are distributed, especially if communication between them is restricted, the more variant forms are likely to develop in the course of time. Contrariwise, with easy and plentiful communication over huge areas, such as we have today, the tendency is toward reducing variant types.

A language like English, which has spread into every corner of the world and come under many influences, is bound to have plentiful variations. There are now several national types (British, American, Canadian, Australian, and so on), regional types (Scots, Irish, East Midlands, et cetera, in Britain; Northern, Midland, and Southern in the United States), and dialectal or local types. These are, so to speak, horizontal variants, since they are distributed geographically. Others are distributed socially, the dialects of various classes or levels within a society—what we might call, therefore, vertical variants. The discipline of linguistic geography, recently developed, sets about describing the distribution, both geographic and cultural, of various linguistic forms. For the United States, linguistic geographers have now compiled a very large and valuable body of information about word variations and sound variations, much of it presented in the form of maps.

Another kind of variation is that of *style*, the differences this time being correlated with the use to which the language is put. One may make a distinction between the styles of practical communication, where information is being transferred rather neutrally, and those of artistic communication, where the attempt is made to present the substance with aesthetic overtones of some kind, to reflect an attitude, to arouse emotion, to influence thought or action. It is recognized that different styles have different uses, that appropriateness is the guiding principle in the choice, a speaker or writer seeking to adapt his use of the language to a specific end. It is recognized that the vertical variants, or "cultural levels" as Kenyon has called them, are regularly marked by linguistic features of vocabulary and grammar; Fries has recognized three such types in American usage.

There are also what Kenyon called "functional varieties"—that is to say, those reserved especially for formal or informal use, for ceremonial or familiar situations, and so on. I will not go into the varieties of artistic styles, but since every variation of whatever kind depends on language, one such as ours is enormously complex. For purposes of teaching we may want or need to concentrate on certain varieties more than others—the ones which students do not know well

enough or at all, such as formal standard English or literary English. But such a limitation must not arise out of narrowness or lead to narrowness. Unless we know *many* varieties of the language, past and present, high and low, practical and artistic, and can distinguish sensitively among them, we do not *know* the language at all. The complexity of English is a challenge, but it has its rewards in the wonderful range and adaptability in expression and communication which it makes possible.

Language Change and the Teacher

Now to my final point: Language changes. May I say that, emotionally, I am deeply in sympathy with the eighteenth century desire to *fix* the language. When one has labored to reach something like perfection, it seems only right that the perfection should be preserved. This human yearning is profound—every poet has somewhere touched upon it—and yet it is a forlorn hope. "Brightness falls from the air . . ." If we ever succeed, as on some *Grecian Urn,* in fixing perfect beauty, perfect truth, it is at the expense of life. What we fix loses the essence of life; however exquisite the pastoral, it is but a cold pastoral. As Dr. Johnson himself wrote when he gave up the hope that his Dictionary could fix the language, "With this consequence I will confess that I flattered myself for a while; but . . . sounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables, and to lash the wind, are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength."

We now realize that the obvious changes of vocabulary are by no means the only ones. Language changes in all its parts: the sounds, the forms, the syntax, the meanings. Rates of change are different for the different parts, though not constant in any case, and varying from language to language. We do not fully understand the reasons behind linguistic conservatism, which is very strong in, say, Lithuanian, and far less strong in English. It is certainly connected with cultural factors. There may be isolation on the one hand and numerous contacts on the other, dynamism or the lack of it. In any case the fact is there. English has changed so much during its 1500-year history that the early forms are unintelligible today without special study. Continuity can be demonstrated all along the line from Old English to Modern English for features of all kinds, but there has been far more change than preservation.

Our English language may be visualized as a ship, sailing, carrying all its speakers along. But they are a restless lot: as the ship sails they stop at various ports, pick up new cargo and new pas-

sengers, throw some overboard. They are always fussing with the boat, constantly rebuilding it piecemeal, changing over from oars to sails, then converting to steam; substituting metal for wood here and there, and enlarging it with outriggers or wireless or a power-steered rudder. Meantime, the striking thing is that, though they never succeed in plugging all the leaks, it stays afloat. In the end it is a fascinating object, some parts of which though very old are still working as they always have; others, though old, changed over to new uses and their former function forgotten. New parts have been patched in more or less effectively down the years, though some appear redundant. From time to time someone who considered himself a naval engineer or architect has tried to bring some artistic order into the whole, but his efforts have had little overall effect because he could never get the ship into drydock. And while he was working away on the poop, others were botching at the scuppers. This strange vessel contains many things, often inconsistent; it has touched at many strange and splendid ports; yet it is still seaworthy, fit for a voyage into space if necessary.

The student of language may observe this strange floating museum in at least two important ways, historically and structurally. In the first case he asks, what was it like in all its various stages, and how did it get from stage to stage? In the second, he wants to know what it is like now, to describe all the existing parts, and to understand its structure and operation. Knowing that change is a fact of life, that the life of language is cyclical, he nether bemoans change as being decay (as if the language had fallen from some previous ideal state); nor does he rationalize change as necessarily bringing progress, since a variety of linguistic structures, though quite different from each other, appear to work equally well as media of communication.

When the student of language is also a teacher of English, he has a special task and a special responsibility. He is being paid to help the younger members of the English-speaking world to discover the resources of their language and to put them to effective use in their lives. The practical side of this is that the student be enabled to communicate information or subject matter of any kind, orally or in writing, to others and to understand their communications as fully and accurately as possible. We must make good readers, good speakers, good writers of our students, taking the word *good* in the practical sense of *successful*. An important part of success in practical communication will consist in conventionality: for each sphere of life certain ways of communicating, certain *styles* if you wish, will be

expected or even required, and the student must learn these. He must even learn something on the negative side: what *not* to do if he is to communicate. This is the job of composition classes.

But in addition to practical communication there is artistic communication, and it is not beyond the reach or the understanding of anyone. The styles we reserve for the expression of our deeper feelings and our more complex thinking must be, fittingly, more highly wrought. We study such communication through the works of its more successful practitioners, not only for the interest of their subject matter, for their commentary on life, but also to see how they have handled the language, what part their style has taken in producing their effects. We may ourselves adopt some features from them and even "play the sedulous ape"—at least, experience the stimulus and the pleasure of literature, which, we believe, has a civilizing and a refining and humanizing effect. This is the job of our literature classes.

At the bottom, the base, the foundation of all communication is language. Present-day studies of its structure have added a new dimension to our understanding of it. Our approach to whatever task we undertake as English teachers ought therefore to be a continuous effort to know the language in all its parts as fully as possible; to know the scholarship on the language; to follow new movements and make ourselves able to evaluate them so that we do not merely run after novelty, but test new theories in the classroom and utilize those parts that we find good. The language itself, quite apart from its uses, is of inexhaustible interest and rewards all those who devote themselves to it. The English language is one of the keys to understanding. Let us respect it and enjoy it.

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